

### ***Your Faith: Alive or Dead?***

In the name of him who does all things well, dear friends in Christ: In our worship last week, we sang in the Hymn of the Day, “By grace I’m saved, grace free and boundless”. It’s a lovely hymn that expresses the three great “solas” of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. It includes this line from the second verse: “By grace! None dare lay claim to merit; our works and conduct have no worth.” This is the truth so clearly articulated in Scripture by the Apostle Paul that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ alone who gave his life for our sins, without any work, merit, achievement, accomplishment, or even good intent on our part. We do nothing. It’s only Jesus. He did it all. Trust in him and what he did to be saved.

And then along comes St. James in today’s Epistle who many think is preaching an entirely different message when he says, “Faith without works is dead”. Indeed, some theologians pit the two inspired writers of Holy Scripture against each other: Paul says our human works have no part in God’s plan of salvation; while James says if you aren’t doing good works, your faith is meaningless and you can’t be saved. So, one says faith without works saves; the other says only faith with works saves. Which one of them is right?

The answer is that they both are. They are addressing different issues. Paul is addressing a person’s standing before God in Christ’s righteousness alone, which righteousness is imputed by faith – by trusting in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice on the cross. There is nothing you can do to add to that. If you try or think you can by including your own few and flawed “good works”, you only ruin it. You shift your trust from Christ, to however small a degree, to trusting in your contribution. And thus you make yourself (at least in part) your savior. Paul emphatically warns against doing that. Those who do, he says, place themselves under the curse of the Law – and that curse is death in time and eternity.

James does not deny any of this. To be sure, he takes for granted that his readers know this. James agrees that faith alone saves. What he’s talking about is the *quality* of the faith that saves. Faith alone, yes; but what kind of faith? Is it simply head-knowledge about Christ’s saving work that’s worn on the sleeve and doesn’t affect your behavior at all? “Jesus died for me? Great! That’s easy! And now I’m free to go on living my self-indulgent, self-centered life. Jesus forgives sin? Oh, then he’s to be busy with me because I sin a lot; and I mean to go right on sinning.” That kind of faith, James tells us, is dead. That kind of faith will save no one.

No, genuine faith, the kind of faith that saves, like the Word of God that created it, is living and active. Works don’t save; but faith that saves *works*. It produces the fruit of faith: the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and mercy toward others. Saving faith is seen, it proves its existence, in these godly attributes put into action on behalf of others. Saving faith produces good works. These good works have no part in improving your standing before God. He sees only Christ and his righteousness in the true believer. God does not need your good works; but your neighbor does. And motivated by the grace of God, saving faith moves you to be compassionate as God is compassionate, to be merciful as God is merciful, to be forgiving as God is forgiving, and to love as God loves, giving yourself in sacrificial service to others.

James forces you to ask the question, “What kind of faith do I have? Is it alive or dead?”

He applies the question specifically to the issue of showing partiality in the church for some people over others. It's only one of a thousand things he could have chosen for illustration; but it's obviously one that was on his mind – and for good reason. Think about the way things were in the first century church. Two thirds of people in the Roman world were slaves. They owned nothing – only what their masters gave them. You had a small class of independent business people, folks who were free but struggled to get by to various degrees of success. And then you had the upper crust – the people with pretty much all of the wealth and power and who were used to throwing them around to get what they wanted. In such a sharply stratified society, it's easy to see how the tendency would be to roll out the red carpet for the rich guy and to be less welcoming to the guy who's just another slave.

Our society here in America is more homogenous. In a community like ours the distance between the rich and the poor is not as great as it was back then – but it still very much exists. And so what James has to say applies to us as well. It's a natural, self-centered thing to do to be more deferential and welcoming to those God has blessed with wealth and success. Why? Because we see them as an asset. That's the kind of person we want in our church. They can pull their weight, so to speak. They can help pay the bills, contribute their talents toward our projects, and lend their wisdom and experience to leadership. At very least they show that they are able to take care of themselves, so they won't be a burden to the rest of us.

The poor guy, however, the guy whose life is full of problems, who has trouble holding down a job, who is a recovering alcoholic, who has a history of making bad decisions—maybe even has a criminal record, whose child is afflicted with cerebral palsy, whatever – that guy, he's not our kind of people. He and his family will be a burden to us. We want to tell him, "Say, have you thought about visiting the Baptist Church? I think you'd like it there. It's a better fit for you."

The evil here is seeing people as assets or burdens instead of what they are: children of God in Christ Jesus, our fellow redeemed, brothers and sisters in the faith and heirs with us in God's eternal kingdom. Dead faith sees the former. Living faith sees the latter – and recognizes that God sends us the poor guy precisely because he means to attend his needs and answer his prayers through us – through our loving works of service which are the fruit of living faith. And, of course, this doesn't apply just to the visitor who wanders in some fine Sunday morning, but to all of our current members as well. The body of Christ takes care of its own. And it seeks to extend itself and incorporate others who are, as yet, outside the faith and fellowship – regardless of their financial status or past history.

Again, this issue of showing favoritism is only one of many things St. James might have used to illustrate how true living faith produces the fruit of faith. He could have used how husbands and wives treat each other, how they raise their children, how we are to forgive those who sin against us, how we allocate our resources of time, talent, and treasure in the service of God's kingdom—all kinds of things that are part of living the Christian life. His point is that we live the life of faith *as Christians*, not deceiving ourselves with a dead faith without works, but rather producing the fruit of faith that demonstrates that saving faith is alive and well.

By his Word and Spirit may our heavenly Father destroy in us all false and dead faith, bring us to repentance, and fill us with true, living, and fruitful faith in Christ Jesus his Son who loved us and gave himself for us that we might love our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***